

# Massachusetts Pidgin

**Massachusetts Pidgin** or **Massachusetts Jargon** was a contact pidgin or auxiliary language derived from the Massachusetts language attested in the earliest colonial records up until the mid-eighteenth century. Little is known about the language, but it shared a much simplified grammatical system, with many features similar to the better attested Delaware Jargon spoken in the nearby Hudson and Delaware watersheds.<sup>[3][4]</sup>

Massachusetts Pidgin and Massachusetts Pidgin English are of interest to scholars of the English language and language contact, as most of the Algonquian loan words adopted from the peoples of New England were adopted through these languages and not directly from Massachusetts.<sup>[4][5]</sup>

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Pidgin Massachusetts	
Massachusetts Jargon	
Region	New England and Long Island, particularly eastern Massachusetts. <sup>[1]</sup>
Era	17th century. Extinct early 18th century. <sup>[2]</sup>
Language family	Massachusetts-based pidgin
Language codes	
ISO 639-3	<i>None</i> (mis)
Glottolog	<i>None</i>

## History

### Development

Massachusetts Pidgin is recorded as early as 1624, when references to it appear in the colonial records. With exception of Mobilian Jargon, most of the auxiliary languages that developed in North America are thought to have been brought about by contact with Europeans. There are several factors in place that make it very likely that the language pre-dated European arrival. The Massachusetts people were once a numerically dominant people of the region, with a large population supported by the fertile lands of the coastal plain and ample access to riparian and ocean food resources. With a strong population, the Massachusetts *sachems* were head of a loose alliance of peoples, covering all the Massachusetts-speaking peoples, the Nipmuc and even the unclassified peoples of the Pioneer Valley before their numbers were felled by the leptospirosis outbreak circa 1619 and subsequent virgin soil epidemics and the large numbers of English colonists that usurped their land and competed with them for resources.<sup>[6]</sup>

Massachusett was spoken by several peoples, including not only the Massachusett, but also the Pawtucket, Wampanoag, Nauset and Coweset peoples. It was mutually intelligible with the other Southern New England Algonquian languages (SNEA), spoken in southern New England and parts of Long Island, and related to but not mutually intelligible with the Abenakian languages spoken to the north and the Delawaran languages to the west and southwest of the SNEA region.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Colonial attestation

The existence of Massachusett Pidgin is only inferred from colonial sources.<sup>[3]</sup> Edward Winslow, who served as governor of the Plymouth Colony, had developed a close relationship with the Wampanoag *sachem* Massasoit and other local Wampanoag leaders and was one of a handful of the Pilgrims that had any command of the local 'Indian language.' In Winslow's 1624 publication *Good News from New England*, he describes a situation where his party of Pilgrim men came across some Wampanoag men they knew and were able to communicate, but when the Wampanoag spoke to each other, it was incomprehensible.<sup>[8]</sup>

Winslow later on recalls the visit of the Massachusett *sachem* Chickatawbut. After exchanging pleasantries with the Winslow and the other representatives of the Plymouth Colony, the conversation between the *sachems* was not understood by Winslow save a few words. Similar accounts are recorded by the Dutch and Swedish colonists of what is now the Mid-Atlantic States and the traditional homeland of the Lenape peoples. Like Winslow, the Dutch and Swedish settlers thought they were speaking the local language, but were actually speaking pidgin varieties thereof.<sup>[8]</sup>

Massachusett Pidgin spread with the fur trade, allowing Indians to communicate with northern and interior tribes and exchange items for beaver pelts, which were highly prized by the English settlers. As beaver became scarce in southern New England, the Indian traders and hunters had to trek further to obtain the desired pelts, likely taking the easy to learn and somewhat intelligible Massachusett Pidgin.<sup>[4]</sup>

As the English settlers were not interested in learning the local language, and the Indians, outnumbered by English settlers, needed English to trade and participate in wider society, switched over to Massachusett Pidgin English, essentially Massachusett Pidgin with heavy English relexification. The Native peoples of New England continued to use their local dialect or language such as Massachusett, Massachusett Pidgin and Massachusett Pidgin English to communicate. Dual use of these by the Native peoples is recorded as early as 1651 in Connecticut, where trade was conducted on English vessels with Indian interpreters possibly code-switching between Massachusett Pidgin and Massachusett Pidgin. Similarly, a court trial involving an Indian accused of stealing a hog was shown a hog's head and told *tatapa you (tâtapaw y8)* /ta : tapa : w ju : /, 'similar to this,' and in Massachusett Pidgin 'all one this' in Massachusett Pidgin English in 1704.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Decline

The Massachusett speaking peoples also adopted English, albeit imperfectly with heavy influences of Massachusett grammar and some vocabulary. The use of the Massachusett language declined in Massachusett communities in the 1750s and the 1770s in the Wampanoag communities as Massachusett Pidgin English, and later English, began to overtake the Native languages. This was part due to assimilation pressures, increased rates of intermarriage with Blacks and Whites outside the speech community and

This co-existed with the usage of Massachusett Pidgin, but as English became more and more necessary to trade and participate in society, and the new settlers were less eager to bother to learn the 'Indian language,' Massachusett Pidgin was rapidly eclipsed by the sole use of Massachusett Pidgin English.<sup>[3][1][9]</sup>

Massachusetts Pidgin may have influenced the late-stage of the Massachusetts language, and many of the small number of words recorded by Speck when he visited the elderly members of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe in the 1920s, many were actually Massachusetts Pidgin derivations. The Massachusetts language went extinct at the end of the nineteenth century, with the death of the last native speakers of Aquinnah, but the language had already declined as the primary language of the Indian communities in the 1770s.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Lexicon

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### Massachusetts

Most of the vocabulary is drawn from the Massachusetts language, although Massachusetts Pidgin does feature some shortened expressions and word compounds that would not be permissible in the normal spoken language. As the majority of the lexicon is derived from Massachusetts, it is assumed that speakers, especially the Natives themselves, pronounced the words according to the rules of Massachusetts phonology.

- *neen*<sup>[10]</sup>, 'I' or 'me,' from Massachusetts *neen*<sup>[11]</sup> (*neen*)<sup>[12]</sup> /niːn/, 'I' or 'me.'
- *nux*<sup>[13]</sup>, 'yes,' from Massachusetts *nukkies*<sup>[14]</sup> (*nukees*) /nəkiːs/, 'yes.'
- *squaw*<sup>[10]</sup>, 'woman' or 'female,' from Massachusetts *squa*<sup>[15]</sup> (*sqâ*)<sup>[16][17]</sup> /skʷaː/, 'woman' or 'female.'
- *matta*<sup>[10]</sup>, 'no' or 'not,' from Massachusetts *matta*<sup>[18]</sup> (*mata*)<sup>[19]</sup> /mata/, 'no' or 'not.'
- *tatapa you*<sup>[20]</sup>, 'the same as this,' from Massachusetts *tatapa yeu* (*tâtapaw y8*)<sup>[21][22]</sup> /taːtapaːwjuː/, 'it is similar (to something) this (thing)' or 'the same as this.' Cf. Massachusetts *tatapéyeu*<sup>[23]</sup> (*tâtapeeyuw*) /taːtapiːjəw/, 'it is alike.'<sup>[21]</sup>
- *tatta*<sup>[13]</sup>, 'I do not know' or 'I do not have,' likely from Massachusetts *tatta*<sup>[24]</sup> (*tatâh*)<sup>[24][25]</sup>, itself a reduplication of *toh* (*tah*), a particle used to indicate the optative, or 'wishing,' mood or doubt.
- *nocake*<sup>[26]</sup>, 'parched cornmeal,' from Massachusetts *nôhkik*<sup>[27]</sup> (*n8hkuheek*)<sup>[28]</sup> /nuːhkəhiːk/, '(cornmeal) that which is softened.'
- *squaw-sachem*, 'queen,' 'female chief,' 'wife of chief,' from Massachusetts *squa* (*sqâ*) and *sachem*<sup>[29]</sup> (*sôtyum*)<sup>[30]</sup> /sãtʲəm/, 'chief.' Proper Massachusetts term is *sunk-squa*<sup>[31]</sup> (*sôkusqâ*)<sup>[32]</sup> /sãkəskʷaː/, 'queen,' 'female chief' or 'wife of chief,' literally 'leaderwoman.'
- *netop*<sup>[33]</sup>, 'friend,' from Massachusetts *nétop*<sup>[34]</sup> (*neetôp*)<sup>[12]</sup> /niːtãp/, 'my friend.'
- *wunnekin*<sup>[35]</sup>, 'good,' from Massachusetts *wunnégen*<sup>[36]</sup> (*wunneekun*)<sup>[37]</sup> /wəniːkən/, 'it is good.'
- *wampumpeag*<sup>[35]</sup>, 'money,' from Massachusetts *wampumpeage*<sup>[38]</sup> (*wôpôpeeak*)<sup>[39][40]</sup> /wãpãpiːak/, 'white shell beads.' The colonists mistakenly thought the strung beads of wampum were currency. Shortened to *wampum* \*(*wôpôp*) and *peag* \*(*peeak*) in usage by the English.

### Other Algonquian

A handful of common words were either borrowings from other Algonquian languages or were archaic retentions that were better understood by other peoples. For instance, although the Massachusetts Pidgin *sanomp* is also found in the Massachusetts-language documents, it was likely a Massachusetts Pidgin borrowing from an Abenakian language, and appears as *zan8mba* in Western Abenaki.

- *wigwam*<sup>[35]</sup>, 'house' or 'home.' Possibly Abenakian, cf. Western Abenaki *wigw8m*<sup>[41]</sup> /wiːkwãm/. Massachusetts form is *wetu* (*weetyuw*) /wiːtʲəw/. Pidgin form probably pronounced

as *\*(weekuwôm)* /wi : kəwãm/. Possibly an archaic retention, both *wigwam* and *wetu* derive from Proto-Algonquian *\*wi·kiwa·hmi*<sup>[42]</sup> Although *wetu* was also known, *wigwam* won as the general word and one that still has currency.

- *sanomp*<sup>[35]</sup>, 'man' or 'married man.' Possibly Abenakian, cf. Western Abenaki *zan8mba* /sanãpa/.<sup>[43]</sup> Although occurs in Massachusett as *sannomp* (*sanôp*)<sup>[44]</sup>, it is rare compared to more common *wasketop* (*waskeetôp*)<sup>[45]</sup> /waski : tãp/, 'man.'
- *sagamore*<sup>[35]</sup>, 'chief' or 'leader.' Possibly Abenakian, cf. Western Abenaki *s8gm8*<sup>[46]</sup> /sãgmã/. Massachusett Pidgin form, pronounced like *\*(sôkumô)* /sãkəmã/, contrasts with Massachusett form is *sachem* (*sôtyum*). Both *sagamore* and *sachem* derive from Proto-Algonquian *\*sa·kima·wa*<sup>[47]</sup>
- *pappoose*<sup>[35]</sup>, 'baby.' Possibly from Narragansett *pappoòs*. Massachusett form is *papeiss*<sup>[48]</sup> (*pâpeewees*)<sup>[49]</sup> /pa : pi : wi : s/. Compare Mohegan-Pequot *pápohs* /pa : pu : hs/.<sup>[50]</sup>

## English

As Massachusett Pidgin was often used to communicate with the English settlers, it naturally incorporated numerous English terms. Hundreds of words were adopted into Massachusett from English, mainly for the new crops, domesticated animals, tools, material culture and religion of the English settlers. Many items of the English quickly became prized items of trade. Although it is uncertain to what extent these words were used in Massachusett Pidgin, the words listed below were known to have been absorbed into the Massachusett language. Due to the reduced phonemic inventory of Massachusett, most words were approximated to their closest Massachusett equivalent sounds. English /r/ and /l/ were often replaced by /n/ due to interference from N-SNEA dialect pronunciation, as Massachusett speakers were familiar with neighboring languages where cognate words with /r/ and /l/ became /n/ in Massachusett. As consonant clusters were limited, an epenthetic vowel was often inserted to ease pronunciation. English words were also overtly marked with the Massachusett declensional pronoun and verb conjugation system, producing hybrid forms.

- *pigsack*<sup>[9]</sup>, 'pigs,' from English 'pigs' (pl) and Massachusett animate plural *-ack* (*-ak*) /ak/. Possibly pronounced *\*/pi : ksak/* or *\*/pəksak/*.
- *coneeko*<sup>[51]</sup>, 'calico cloth,' from English 'calico.'
- *applesank*<sup>[51]</sup>, 'apple tree,' from English 'apples' (pl) and Massachusett *ank* (*-ôhq*)<sup>[52]</sup> /ãhk/, 'tree.' Possibly pronounced *\*/apənsãhk/*.
- *nukohtumun*<sup>[51]</sup>, 'we (exclusive) hold court,' from English 'court' and Massachusett *nu...umun* (*nu...umun*). Possibly pronounced *\*/nəkahtəmən/*.
- *moneyash*<sup>[51]</sup>, 'money,' from English 'money' and Massachusett inanimate plural *ash* (*-ash*) /aʃ/. Possibly pronounced *\*/mani : aʃ/*.
- *Frenchmensog*<sup>[51]</sup>, 'Frenchmen,' from hypercorrected plural of English 'Frenchmen' and Massachusett animate plural. Possibly pronounced as *\*/panatʃ[ə]mənsak/*, from variant spelling *panachmansog*.

## Grammatical features

Like Pidgin Delaware, verbs in Massachusett are simplified into the inanimate forms. For example, Massasoit is believed to have said to Winslow upon his deathbed, *Matta neen wonckanet namen Winsnow* (*Mata neen wôkanut nâmun Winsnow*), 'Oh Winslow, I shall never see thee again' but more literally 'Not I again see Winslow.' In standard Massachusett, the expected verb would be *nunau* (*nunâw*)<sup>[53]</sup> /nəna : w/, a

transitive animate verb, 'I see (someone)' or more direct (*kunâwush*) /kənaːwəʃ/, 'I see you,' as opposed to *nâmun* (*nâmun*)<sup>[54]</sup> /naːmən/, the transitive inanimate 'see it.' The simplification of all the verbs to inanimate forms necessitated the need of pronouns to clarify meaning as opposed to the standard Algonquian languages which are pro-drop due to the pronominal information encoded in the verb declension.<sup>[10]</sup>

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